

ORNITHOLOGICAL NOTES FROM PAKISTAN¹

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Compared with the growing popularity of bird watching as a hobby in neighbouring India and the valuable contributions which have been made in recent years by a new generation of enthusiastic zoologists and naturalists, the situation in Pakistan is still rather discouraging. In the past thirty years there have been very few ornithologists working in this region and regrettably most published observations have emanated from foreigners who have been temporarily working in this country. Fortunately, I know of two young Pakistani naturalists, both of whom are currently taking degrees in wildlife management and vertebrate ecology in the U.S.A. and who will undoubtedly spread their knowledge and enthusiasm after their return to this country and it is to be hoped that there will ensue interesting developments and fresh contributions to our understanding of the bird fauna of this region.

Meanwhile this note puts on record some of my own more interesting observations during the past year and to 'keep the home fires burning' so to speak.

Haliaeetus albicilla Whitetailed Sea Eagle.

This magnificent fish eagle is rare enough to warrant continued recording of its occurrence and I was interested to note the second sight record for Nepal of this species by Gooders (*JBNHS* 75 (3) : 925-926). This description of the distinctive tail patterns of a sub-adult, coincides exactly with a detailed description given by us, in a note submitted ten years ago

about the occurrence of this eagle in Pakistan (see Roberts & Savage *JBNHS* 66 (3) : 619-622). I believe this pattern is associated with four year old birds in the last year before they produce white tail feathers. On January 8th, 1980 a Sea Eagle was seen by myself and a group of friends on Hadiero Lake (24° 50' N, 67° 53' E) some sixty miles due east of Karachi. It caught a large fish basking near the surface and we watched it feeding on its prey on a nearby bare stony hillock. When disturbed (by our photographic efforts) it was mobbed by Black Kites which were wheeling around in the vicinity. My companion Kent Forssgren, a professional ornithologist from Sweden was familiar with this species from his studies in the Baltic, and though it had a completely dark-brown tail he thought that it was probably a three year old male. It was not resighted on subsequent visits to this lake. Ghauspur Jheel in Jacobabad District (28° 09' N, 69° 05' E) is the most likely locality in the whole of Pakistan to encounter this eagle and in November 1979 I also saw one immature specimen. The previous year during a visit to Ghauspur in early February I had failed to sight any Whitetailed Sea Eagle.

Chlidonias leucopterus Whitewinged Black Tern.

I recorded seeing individuals in breeding plumage in the vicinity of Karachi in May 1977 (*JBNHS* 75 (1) : 216-219) which was apparently the first record for this region. I can now add that in May 1978 and 1979 three or four individuals of this beautiful little tern have been observed by me, both in brackish pools near the Karachi coast (Ghizri Creek)

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as well as at Haleji Reservoir some fifty miles inland. It therefore appears to be a regular spring passage migrant off the Karachi coast and inland. I have always seen it in company with larger numbers of Whiskered Terns (*Chlidonias hybridus*) and I only attempted identification from individuals already clearly showing their breeding plumage.

Metopidius indicus Bronzewinged Jacana.

Again I was interested to note in the latest issue of the Society's Journal, that Shri Lalsinghbhai Raol records the first record of this species near Jamnagar on the Saurashtra peninsula (*JBNHS* 75 (3) : 923). In the Sind Gazetteer section covering the avifauna, which was compiled by Kenneth Eates after over thirty years of bird watching in the Province, he noted (page 52) that it was strange that no individual of this species had ever been sighted even in lower Sind. It is also apparently unknown from the Punjab. On February 14th, 1980 at Haleji Reservoir, (24° 49' N, 67° 44' E) three square mile lake which is now preserved as a wildlife sanctuary, I encountered a pair calmly feeding out in the open and not more than 200 metres from the roadside embankment. On March 1st they were still there and joined by a third individual. I was fortunate to be able to borrow a 1,000 mm telephoto lens from a friend on the day when they were encountered so was able to get a good series of photographs. The bill is distinctly heavier than that of the Pheasant-tailed Jacana which was feeding nearby and of course the latter species does not have a frontal shield extending over the forecrown. The individuals appeared to be all adults and to be mainly feeding on small crustacea or aquatic insects as I saw them peck at objects on the surface of lotus lily leaves and even pull the leaves up in their bills, but they made no attempt to eat the leaf vegetation.

Monarcha azurea Blacknaped Monarch Flycatcher.

A female suddenly arrived in my garden at Malir, just north of Karachi on December 21st, 1979 and it stayed around for seven weeks until February 10th 1980 affording many delightful hours of watching. This flycatcher was recorded by C. B. Ticehurst (*Ibis*, Oct. 1922) in his Birds of Sind as the 'merest vagrant' in winter. He collected a single specimen in February 1919. Jack Coles, a friend who worked as a newspaper correspondent in Karachi during the 1960's also found a female with a nest in Malir in April 1971, but he never saw the male and the nest was regrettably robbed shortly thereafter. This is my first observation in seven years of residence here but obviously stray individuals must be regular visitors. Our particular female had the habit of retiring at dusk to the same roosting tree and was particularly noisy at this time, hopping about in the branches and uttering its rather harsh wheezy calls.

Muscicapa rubeculoides Bluethroated Flycatcher.

This appears to be another first record for Pakistan as far as I am aware. In volume seven of Salim Ali's HANDBOOK it is recorded as occurring westwards up to the Chenab River and is not even recorded for Kashmir.

In the Margalla Hills (33° 28' N, 73° 03' E) which serve as a backdrop for the new capital city of Islamabad, I heard a strange bird singing on the evening of May 26th 1979. This was in a stony ravine with non-perennial pools of water but in very thick thorny scrub including *Zizyphus mauritiana*, *Carissa opaca* and *Woodfordia floribunda*. Try as I might, and even crawling on hands and knees I could not get a glimpse of the singing bird. The next evening I had to catch a plane back to Karachi but a visit to the same spot was rewarded by a clear view of a singing male in the lower

branches of a *Ficus* higher up the same ravine. Its song consisted of a rather continuous warble reminiscent of a *Hippolais*. It may have been only an odd male trying to establish a nesting territory as I did not find any trace of it during a subsequent visit in July.

Cettia brunnifrons Rufouscapped Bush Warbler.

The western subspecies of this skulking little warbler is recorded in Volume 8 of Sálím Ali's HANDBOOK (page 17) as occurring as far west as the Pir Panjal range in Kashmir but it is not recorded for Pakistan. Perhaps the Murree Hills across the Jhelum River from the Pir Panjal, do not provide a sufficiently alpine habitat as this species has never been noted from these hills which are well worked ornithologically. In the Kaghan Valley, of Hazara District further west, there is a secluded valley to the west of the Kunhar River, known as Sharan Forest (34° 43' N., 73° 20' E.) and during a visit to this area in 1978 I got a tantalizingly fleeting glimpse of this bird but could not identify it. On July 7th 1979, when visiting the same area, I found this Bush Warbler to be quite plentiful at the upper limit of the tree line around 10,000 feet or higher, in both scrub-willow and stunted Blue Pines. I got good recordings of its cheery little song and found that it was quite fearless of humans approaching within twenty feet as it busily foraged amongst the rocks and bushes. The bright rufous red cap contrasts with its rather olive brown back and wing coverts. There is a broad creamy supercilium, a dark eye streak and the lower mandible is yellow at the base. The throat and breast are greyish white whilst the vent is pale creamy fulvous. It is such a noisy little bird, that I do not think it would have escaped notice before, so that I suspect the Sharan population may be a somewhat isolated one. It shares its habitat at this elevation in Sharan with the Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) and the

Orange Flanked Bush Robin (*Erithacus cyanurus*).

Zoothera citrina Orangeheaded Ground Thrush.

Hugh Whistler in his notes on the birds of Rawalpindi and the Murree Hills (*Ibis*, January 1930, p. 91) merely lists this thrush as nesting in the Murree Hills on the basis of an earlier note published by Col. C. H. T. Marshall, who found a nest in the Murree area in 1870. This must be the only basis for the Murree Hills being included in its distributional range in Volume 9 of the HANDBOOK. Since I have lived for short periods in the Murree Hills and felt that I knew the region's ornithology pretty well, I had the temerity to write to the distinguished authors, (when Volume 9 was being compiled) and suggested that Pakistan should be deleted from the distributional range of this thrush. But in late July 1978, I went up to Islamabad particularly to try and sight the Indian Pitta in the adjoining Margalla Hills where it had been seen for the first time in Pakistan by my young friend Kamal Islam (see *JBNHS* 75 (3) : 924-925), I was unable to find the Pitta on that visit but did investigate an obviously Turdine songster (all the thrush species breeding in the Murree Hills are silent by the end of July) which to my delight and surprise turned out to be the Orangeheaded Ground Thrush. I only encountered it in one of the side ravines and at an elevation of about 1,600 feet and between 6 a.m. and 7 a.m. located three singing males. This place is some thirty miles away from Murree town and is ecologically in an area quite distinct from the Murree Hills. I was able to get good recordings of their songs which continued for four or five minutes without interruption with many mimetic phrases from the Hawk Cuckoo (*Cuculus varius*) and the Pied Crested Cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*). They sang from the lower branches of shady trees and allowed

reasonably close observation. I also saw them again in 1979 and do not doubt that there is a small monsoon season visiting population which breeds here in Pakistan. Scores of previous visits to the Margalla Hills earlier in the summer or in winter have never produced any sightings of this thrush.

Pitta brachyura Indian Pitta.

After the disappointment of failing to find the Pitta first noticed in June 1978 (referred to above), I again visited the same ravine in the Margalla Hills in May 1979. At sunrise I was rewarded by the unmistakable 'whit-wheear' call of this jewel-like bird from a rather dry

and exposed hillside. Later I found that at least five or six pairs were haunting the thickets on either side of a dry stream bed in the bottom of the ravine. They were shy and furtive and difficult to see even when heard calling from a few feet away. I twice saw males in excited courtship or aggressive flight chases. Their wings make quite a loud whirring. I have no doubt also that there is a small breeding colony in this ravine and the fact that they have escaped notice up to this time may largely be due to the fact that they are confined to rather impenetrable thorny thickets in one small valley. They shared this habitat with Rustycheeked Scimitar Babblers, Paradise Flycatchers and Plaintive Cuckoos.

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